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VIEWS

*Rowland Evans
And Robert Novak*

Reagan Sheds His Mideast Fantasies

Although President Reagan was too polite to let it show, he was unpleasantly surprised when Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin informed him during his last Oval Office visit not to worry about congressional reaction to the Lebanon invasion because, as Begin said, "I can handle" Capitol Hill.

Begin's claim to have such persuasive powers in the U.S. Congress flashed a warning signal to Reagan about the American-Israeli relationship. The warning was compounded by Israel's use of its U.S.-supplied military power in Lebanon. The result was Reagan's cool, dispassionate speech Wednesday evening obliterating vestiges of candidate Reagan's Mideast policy fantasies. Reagan reminded Begin that Israel has pledged to give West Bank Palestinians full autonomy over their land and resources as well as themselves. Beyond that, the president's speech was calculated to appeal to many American Jews who, with moderate Israeli leaders in the once-dominant Labor Party, disown threats by Begin and Defense Minister Ariel Sharon to annex the occupied territories.

It was no accident that Reagan received the moderate Labor Party leader, Shimon Peres, in the Oval Office two weeks ago, an unusual invitation for an out-of-power party leader. No clearer sign could have been given Begin and Sharon that the United States will never accept an Israeli takeover of the West Bank.

The chief architect of Reagan's new Palestinian policy was Secretary of State George Shultz. The Israelis are mistaken, however, if they think Shultz, following Alexander Haig's pro-Israel tenure, coerced the president into accepting a plan against his own ideological beliefs, as he has sometimes been coerced on economic policies. On the contrary, the new West Bank plan is unanimously backed by Reagan, National Security Adviser William P. Clark, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, and CIA chief William J. Casey, as well as Shultz.

What helped convert Reagan from benign defender of Israel's settlements policy during the 1980 presidential campaign to his demand for a freeze on all new settlements was the Begin-Sharon practice of ignoring American interests. Reagan's alarm that the rest of the world saw the United States as a client of Israel began when Israel bombed Iraq's nuclear plant, escalated with the annexation of Syria's Golan Heights and the early bombings of Lebanon and climaxed with the siege of Beirut. Then came threats to Jordan.

The timing of the speech was dictated by Israel's dispersal of the PLO from Beirut and the proof of military dominance that Reagan found in its victory over both the PLO and Syria. "The PLO has lost its legs and Israel's cries for help are losing their appeal in the U.S.," a top presidential aide told us. "This was the time to move on the West Bank."

Even in moving, Reagan was given another reason to question Begin's good faith. When his letter outlining the new plan was handed to Begin on Tuesday, the prime minister was asked to say nothing until Reagan's speech to the American people. But Begin leaked the letter in what the White House believes was a sabotage effort. Reagan reacted by moving up his speech 24 hours and nursing another grievance.

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